

carpetbaggers

Carpetbagger was an epithet used by conservative Southern whites after the Civil War to describe Northerners who settled in the South and entered politics as Republicans during RECONSTRUCTION. Southern conservatives believed that these men had come to the South with no more belongings than could fit into a carpetbag (a small traveling bag), intending to gain political power with ex-slaves' votes and then to use their influence to get rich through economic concessions from the state, fraud, and corruption. By repeating this charge over and over and publicizing the occasions on which it proved true, Southern conservatives fomented hatred that often led to violence against Northern-born Southern Republicans and turned even Northern Republicans against them. Faced with such attacks and with social ostracism, many of these Northern immigrants left the South, and others abandoned politics entirely, depriving Southern Republicans of much of their political leadership.

Although there were important instances of carpetbagger corruption, historians now feel the charges were exaggerated and politically motivated. They note that carpetbaggers provided some of the most progressive Southern political leadership of the 19th century and that many combined idealism with their political ambition.

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